

**Environmental Analysis
Bureau of Land Management
Las Vegas Field Office
Meadow Valley Wash Area
Stuart Ranch Emergency Closure**

EA Number: NV-052–2008-353

I. PURPOSE AND NEED FOR THE PROPOSED ACTION

In October of 2007 the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) acquired a 278-acre property referred to as the Stuart Ranch property (Figures 1 and 2) using Round 5 Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act (SNPLMA) funds. The land was acquired to protect on-site cultural resources and an extensive riparian corridor along Meadow Valley Wash., which is habitat for the endangered Southwestern Willow Flycatcher and state sensitive fish species, the Meadow Valley Wash desert sucker and speckled dace. Because the wash has perennial flow, it supports a healthy and vigorous riparian area full of cottonwoods and willows, which is extremely rare in the desert ecosystem of Southern Nevada. Past land uses, including mining and agriculture, and effects from the 2005 floods have degraded the landscape. The BLM is working to restore the entire site back to a natural condition, including enhancement and restoration of the riparian corridor, ephemeral washes and uplands.

Since the property has been acquired by the BLM, public use on the property has increased. This increased use has already led to damage of cultural sites on the property. In order to protect the resources within the property, the BLM proposes an emergency closure for the Stuart Ranch area to protect environmentally sensitive resources from future potential impacts until a plan can be done to determine how the area will be restored and how it will be managed. Foot travel during business hours would be allowable, no vehicle traffic, target shooting, or overnight recreation would be allowed. This closure would be in effect for up to 2 years.

The BLM wishes to protect the sensitive resources at the Stuart Ranch property until the final management plan can be developed. This closure would not apply to hunting under the laws and regulations of the State of Nevada with the exception of access on the property.

Conformance with Land Use Plan:

The proposed action is consistent with the Record of Decision for the Approved Las Vegas Resource Management Plan and Final Environmental Impact Statement (BLM 1998) to protect riparian areas (RP-1-b) and cultural resources (CR1).

Alternative A – Proposed Action

The proposed action is to close the property area to vehicle access, target shooting and overnight recreation and build a new fence to allow access to Davies Springs in the Mormon Mountain Wilderness Area. The fence will be approximately 350 feet long and constructed using post and cable. Foot travel onto the property during daytime hours

would be allowed with this closure. This closure would not apply to hunting under the laws and regulations of the State of Nevada, although access for hunting activities would be by foot travel only. Those exempt to the closure include: 1. any Federal, State, or local officer or employee in the scope of their duties, 2. members of any organized rescue or fire-fighting force in performance of an official duty, 3. any person authorized in writing by the Bureau of Land Management. This closure would remain in effect until a final management plan for the property can be developed. The new fence will go thru the old gravel pit area which is previously disturbed.

Alternative B - No Action Alternative:

The no action alternative would leave the area open to all recreational activities. The public would be able to drive vehicles, target shoot and camp within the entire property.

II. DESCRIPTION OF THE EXISTING ENVIRONMENT:

Location: Meadow Valley Wash Area, Stuart Ranch property

¼ NE ¼ NE SECTION 1 T13S R65E

¼ SE ¼ NE SECTION 1 T13S R65E

¼ NE ¼ SE SECTION 1 T13S R65E

¼ SE ¼ SE SECTION 1 T13S R65E

¼ SW ¼ NW SECTION 6 T13S R66E

¼ NW ¼ SW SECTION 6 T13S R66E

¼ SW ¼ SW SECTION 6 T13S R66E

Vegetation:

The Meadow Valley Wash riparian area is dominated by salt cedar (*Tamarisk sp.*), willows (*Salix sp.*), cottonwood trees (*Populus sp.*), rabbitbrush (*Ericameria sp.*), and cattails (*Typha sp.*).

The upland area surrounding the project area is dominated by a creosote (*Larrea tridentata*) - white bursage (*Ambrosia dumosa*) plant community. Co-dominates typically include; four-wing saltbush (*Atriplex canescens*), Mojave yucca (*Yucca schidigera*), and several varieties of cactus.

Water sources:

The Stuart Ranch property encompasses approximately 1 mile of Meadow Valley Wash, which flows perennially throughout the property and typically goes dry a few hundred feet downstream of the property boundary. The riparian area is approximately 20 feet wide in most areas and supports a wide variety of vegetation including willows, cottonwoods, sedges and tamarisk. Riparian areas act as transition zones between the aquatic and upland areas increasing benefits such as fish and wildlife habitat, erosion control, forage, late season streamflow, and water quality.

Wildlife:

The affected environment is entirely surrounded by the Mormon Mesa Area of Environmental Concern, but is not included within the ACEC jurisdiction.

The riparian area and wash are habitat for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Federally Endangered listed Southwestern willow flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii extimus*), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Species of Concern and Nevada State Sensitive, Meadow Valley Wash desert sucker (*Catostomus clarkii* sp.) and Meadow Valley Wash speckled dace (*Rhinichthys osculus* sp.). Chuckwalla (*Sauromalus* sp.), gila monster (*Heloderma suspectum*), red tail hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*), burrowing owl (*Athene cunicularia*), insects and numerous non-game inhabit the area and use vegetative and water resources. Other wildlife that frequents the area are primarily small mammals, reptiles and various birds. Wildlife use the wash areas for cover, water and forage.

Soils:

The area soils are mostly alluvial in nature and are a mixture of fine sandy loams, silty clayey loam, badlands and cobbly sandy loam. Soils in the southeast area (Tonopah formation) have a gypsum content of 5%. The majority of the proposed action falls into a low to moderate erosion susceptibility class. The erosion condition class for the area is slight to moderate.

Visual Resources:

The proposed action would occur within VRM Class III. The objective of this class is for partial retention of the existing character of the landscape. There will be no change to the characteristic landscape with the proposed actions.

Threatened and endangered species:

No surveys for threatened and endangered species have been performed on the property since it has just recently become public land. Surveys performed in the vicinity of the property suggest that the area densities are typically low for desert tortoise.

Cultural Resources:

The *National Historic Preservation Act of 1966* requires that Federal agencies take into account the effects of their undertakings. The Area of Potential Effect is limited to existing disturbance. There are known cultural sites within the area.

IV. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

Alternative 1: The proposed action has been analyzed to assess direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts to critical elements of the human environment listed below. Those elements not present are checked “No”. Non-critical elements are discussed and analyzed in further detail following the checklist.

Direct/Indirect/ Cumulative	No Affect	Value	Rationale
	X	Air Quality	Air quality would not be affected due to the restriction of vehicular traffic.
	X	ACECs	The proposed action does not occur within an ACEC.
X		Cultural Resources	The proposed action will help protect cultural resources within the project area. The proposed action is exempt from Section 106 review as set forth in Appendix C.10 of the State Protocol Agreement with the Nevada State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO).
	X	Environmental Justice	There are no known minority or low-income groups in the area that would be affected by the proposal.
	X	Farmlands, Prime/Unique	No prime or unique farmlands are present within the proposed action location.
	X	Floodplains	The proposed action would not increase the flood hazard to Meadow Valley Wash
	X	Native American Concerns	No surface disturbance will occur in areas of known cultural resources.
	X	Paleontological Resources	No paleontological resources.
X		Riparian Resources	There would be no alteration to the riparian habitat within the project area. Riparian resources would be protected under this action.
X		T&E Species	Low-density desert tortoise habitat exists within project area. This project has a no affect determination on desert tortoise (<i>Gopherus agassizii</i>) and will have no affect on any other federally listed species or designated critical habitat. The proposed action will help to protect T&E species.
	X	Wastes, Hazardous/Solid	No known hazardous are present in the area.
X		Water Quality	The proposed action would reduce the potential for impacts to water quality by restricting vehicular access to the area.
X		Weeds, noxious	There are known noxious weeds in the project area including tamarix and brassica, the proposed action will help reduce the spread of noxious weeds.
	X	Wilderness	The proposed action does not occur within any Wilderness Areas or WSA's.

Biological and Cultural Resources

There are no potential detrimental impacts to biological or cultural resources by closing off the Stuart Ranch property.

Cultural Resources

As the project area is defined, the proposed action would be exempt and a Cultural Resource Class III inventory under the BLM-SHPO Protocol Agreement. The proposed action will help to protect the cultural resources at Stuart Ranch by limiting use.

Threatened and Endangered Species

The project will take place in desert tortoise habitat, where densities are typically low. This species and others will benefit from the closure as proposed by the BLM LVFO. Other species to benefit include: chuckwalla, gila monster, Meadow Valley Wash desert sucker, speckled dace, red tail hawk, burrowing owl, southwestern willow flycatcher, and nearly all migratory avian species which use the area for rest and feeding during the two migratory periods each year, along with many rodent and reptile species.

Riparian Areas

The proposed project will help protect the riparian habitat along Meadow Valley Wash within the Stuart Ranch property. Disallowing vehicular travel within the project area, reduces the potential for removal and crushing of vegetation, compaction of soils and formation of stream crossings. When vehicles drive within riparian areas and cross streams they remove vegetation and create vectors for surface runoff and sediment movement directly into streams.

Water Quality

The proposed action will help keep water quality at its existing level and reduce the potential for future degradation. By keeping the riparian area intact and allowing for future recruitment of vegetation within the wash, existing disturbed areas along the wash will be able to re-vegetate and the potential for new disturbed areas will be reduced. These disturbances can act as point sources for surface runoff and sediment to enter the wash and degrade water quality.

Noxious Weeds

Noxious weed populations already exist on the property, specifically species of tamarisk and brassica. By controlling traffic and use on the property, there will be a reduction in the spread and infestation of existing weed populations and a reduction in the potential for new populations to form.

Mining Claims

There are existing mining claims within the vicinity of the Stuart Ranch property. Access to the claim by the claimant may be required through the property. The claimant will be allowed access if needed.

No Action Alternative: The no action alternative would leave the area open to full recreational use. This would allow the public to enter the property at any time of the day

and recreate in any manner they wish. This would lead to continued degradation and loss of environmentally and culturally sensitive resources. Vehicular traffic would lead to the increased spreading of noxious weeds, increased trails on the property and would give the public easier access to cultural resources.

Cumulative Impacts:

Stuart Ranch is located along Meadow Valley Wash just south of the Lincoln County boundary. The area of cumulative impacts would encompass the Stuart Ranch property and surrounding riparian habitat along Meadow Valley Wash. Perennial water flows a few hundred feet downstream of the property boundary before the flow goes subsurface. Protection of the riparian habitat within the property will help protect the in-stream flows within Meadow Valley Wash and allow for continual perennial flow downstream. Protecting the area will also help reduce the potential for spreading of noxious weeds via vehicles to surrounding areas that are currently not infested.

The Stuart Ranch property has been a private in-holding until October 2007. Public access to the area while it was private land was regulated by the land owner and caretaker of the property. By closing the property off to specific recreational uses, we are allowing some new recreational opportunities in the area that historically would not have been allowed without permission from the private landowner.

Recommended Project Mitigation:

Public access will only allow for foot travel onto the property during daytime hours with this closure. This closure would not apply to hunting under the laws and regulations of the State of Nevada, although access for hunting activities would be by foot travel only.

Those exempt to the closure include:

1. Any Federal, State, or local officer or employee in the scope of their duties,
2. Members of any organized rescue or fire-fighting force in performance of an official duty,
3. Any person authorized in writing by the Bureau of Land Management.

ADDITIONAL MITIGATION MEASURES

1. All motorized vehicles are restricted to existing roads. Use is not permitted on any roads that access by the permittee will modify the condition of the road.
2. Speed limit of 25 mph will be maintained on all unposted dirt roads.
3. All litter, garbage and trash shall be removed from the site daily.
4. The painting of rocks or the establishment of permanent markers or improvements is prohibited.
5. Desert tortoises are protected by law. Handling or harassing is prohibited unless they are in imminent danger (eg. from oncoming traffic).
6. Prior to moving a parked vehicle the tires and ground beneath the vehicle will be inspected for desert tortoises. If a tortoise is found, it must be

allowed to move out of harms way on its own volition. If it has withdrawn it is considered in imminent danger and may be moved in accordance with approved handling techniques.

7. No permanent ground disturbance is authorized in association with this activity.
8. Applicant must not disturb archaeological and historical sites, including, but not limited to, petroglyphs, ruins, historic buildings, and artifacts. Any cultural artifacts discovered through permitted operations must be left in place.
9. Applicants will be provided with a copy of the Invasive Weed Identification for Nevada handbook. Participants should become weed aware and not transport weed seeds or plant parts from one site to another. They will need to inspect, remove, and dispose of weed seeds and plant parts found on their clothing and equipment. Disposal methods vary depending on the project.

III. PREPARER:

Sarah Peterson, Hydrologist
Las Vegas Field Office

IV. CONSULTATION

Sarah Peterson - Hydrologist
Jayson Barangan – Wildlife Biologist & Vegetation
Susanne Rowe – Archeologist
Mark Chandler – Visual Resources
David Fanning – Mineral Resources
Everett Bartz – Range & Noxious Weeds
Jeffery Steinmetz – Environmental Coordinator

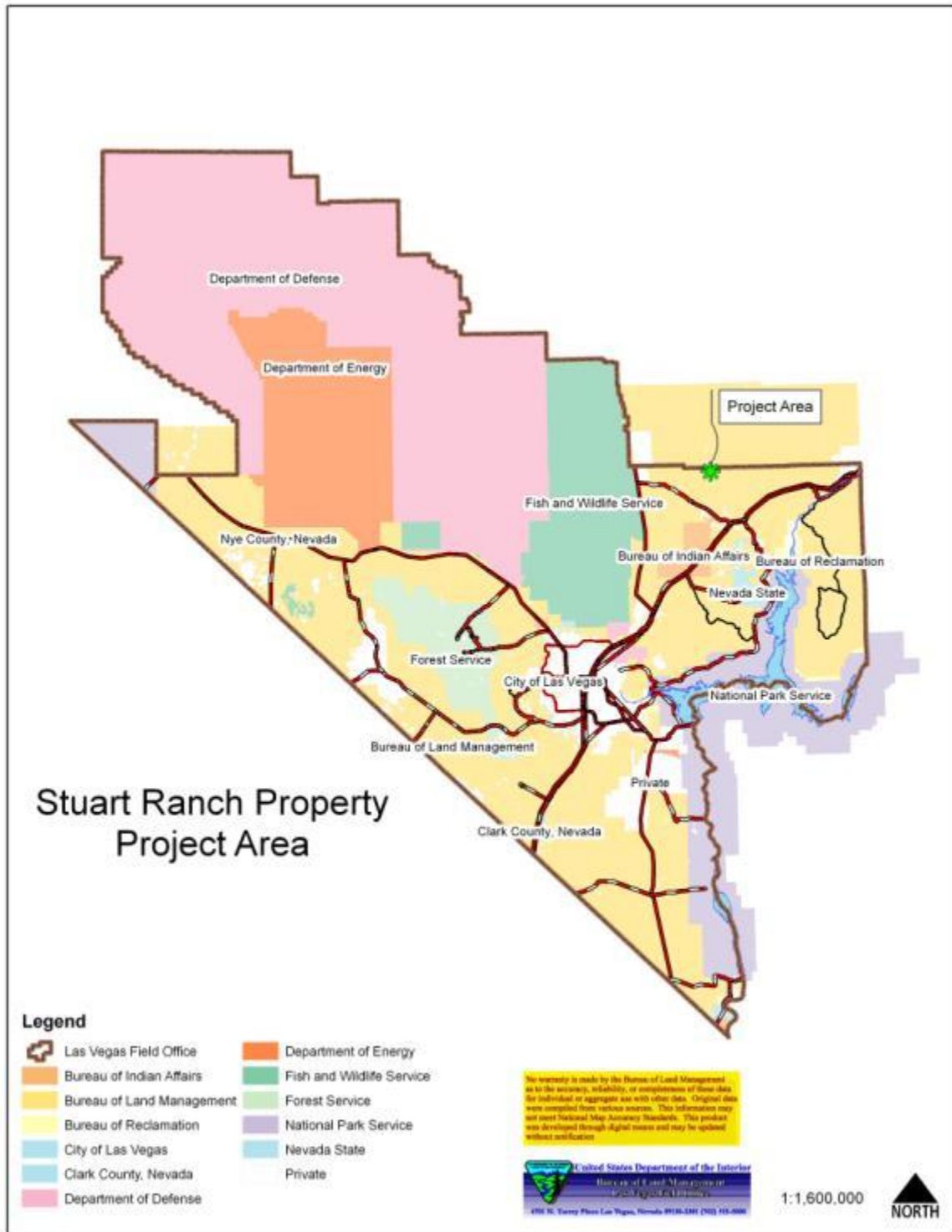


Figure 1. Project Location

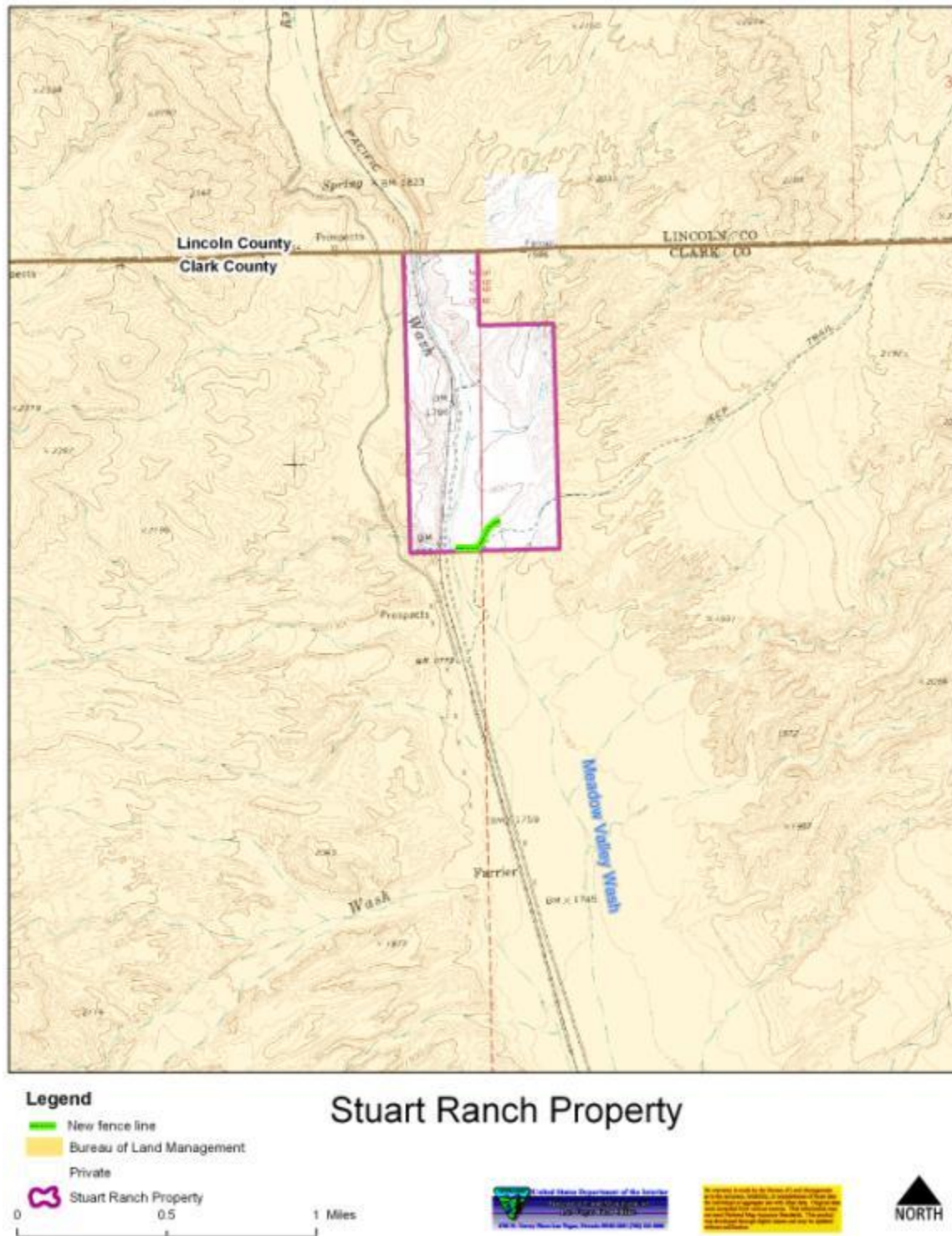


Figure 2. Map of project area

Appendix A
Comments to Public Scoping

A public scoping letter was sent out and the EA and unsigned FONSI were posted on the BLM website on July 10, 2008 with comments due to the BLM by August 22, 2008. The public scoping letter was sent to a list of approximately 442 people including local residents, congressionals and other interested parties. We received 4 responses to the public scoping letter, below is a list of the concerns taken from the responses.

Response	Date Received	Concern	BLMs Response
1	07/14/2008	Unregulated motorized access results in immediate destruction of resources.	BLM agrees with statement
		Reduced budgets result in minimal BLM law enforcement resulting in need for closure.	BLM agrees with statement
2	07/17/2008	Closure results in the reduction of citizens rights by limiting access.	As the land managing agency, the BLM has the responsibility to determine appropriate access to sensitive land within our jurisdiction based upon resource needs. This closure only limits the methods of access and uses on the property. BLM has the authority to close areas under 43 CFR 8364.
3	07/18/2008	The closure will result in limiting access to Davies Springs in the Mormon Mountain Wilderness by closing off the only access road to the area.	A new fence will be constructed to allow access on the road while closing of vehicle access to the rest of the property.
4	07/28/2008	Closure restricts the ability for disabled individuals to access the property.	The proposed action is for a temporary closure to allow for protection of on-site resource while the BLM develops a restoration plan and determines the allowable uses for the area.
		Closure is unwarranted and poorly justified.	The closure is in conformance with the Las Vegas Resource Management Plan by protecting biological and cultural resources. Since the

			property has been acquired and made open to the public, new damage to resources on the property has proliferated. This closure will help to deter further degradation until the property can be restored and access managed.
--	--	--	--